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Graphic Communications Management

GCM 490: Thesis

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*“What are the challenges of designing with Arabic type  
and the process of Arabization within the typographical  
landscape?”*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis highlights the challenges of designing with Arabic typography within the Middle East. Individual interviews were conducted to obtain information from primary resources, such as those who are actively working within the design industry. The findings highlighted the lack of educational opportunities that Arabic typography offers as well as the absence of a strong design community within the Middle East. Designers are coming together to continue encouraging the advancement and growth of this field by the willingness to persist in its further development through pedagogical methods of sharing the knowledge.

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## **Introduction**

Typography is a powerful instrument that designers use to convey emotion and communicate messages. This thesis aims to focus on the complexity of the Arabic language, script and its design in relation to the readily available Latin type. By accentuating the challenges of Arabic typographic design in an ever-evolving landscape, this thesis intends to inform and expose the unfamiliarity within the landscape to those who are not fully exposed to it. Though Arabic type has evolved and come further than it ever has before, there remains a large gap within the education and design of the script.

Herman Zapf, a German type designer, had stated that “typography is a two-dimensional architecture based on experience and imagination, and guided by rules and readability.” This quote has outlined the fundamental structures of typographic design. This thesis will continue to unravel the hidden challenges that are presented when designing with a different language, through a new script and embodying a different culture. With the deep exploration of many designers' perspectives on the challenges that have been present, the knowledge and questions of the Arabic design landscape have been addressed and delved deeper into an analysis of its field. Sarah Alfalah had expressed the complexities of the Arabic language in itself and the beauty that is being disregarded, only to universalize such communication.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review aims to highlight the challenges with the Arabization of typography within brands and their logos. “Arabization” is defined to be the process of translating an idea, concept or message from its original language, into Arabic, (Afzal, 2018). This concept is highly utilized within the Middle East and this thesis aims to expand upon the challenges Arab designers face in their regular practice.

The art of linguistic typography is a topic that has been neglected until recently, when type had flourished into its global appreciation. In regards to the Arabic language, there is a large gap within the typographic landscape and a lack of research of its intricate design and development, which hinders the knowledge and information that Arabic type design has to offer. The sources included have touched upon the absence of the variety in choosing appropriate Arabic typefaces because it may have not been created yet.

My research intends to speak more about the challenges in designing Arabic script typefaces as well as shedding light on the design landscape within the Middle East. I will mainly be focusing on the scarcely addressed process of designing Arabic type since Latin type has been thoroughly examined and researched upon. There are many challenges in regards to the process of developing Arabic type and my research will touch base on the importance that these visual elements hold.

In Smitshuijzen Abiefarès' article on the turning point of Arabic Typography, she addresses several discrepancies and the uniformity that the Arabic type conveys. There are struggles in discovering suitable typefaces for certain projects, as well as the need for collaboration between Arab and Western communities. This will tie into Thomas Jockin's article in which he interviews Arabic type designers to examine their perspectives on the absence of the required basics in type education. Since typography, specifically the historical aspect of Arabic type, is so vast, Kristyan Sarkis and Lara Captan demonstrated their objective to create a community of passionate individuals who are interested in investing time and effort towards advancing Arabic type, in which they will continue to research and study the history of the script.

In the *Arabesque: Graphic Design from the Arab World and Persia* book compiled by Ben Wittner and Sasha Thomas it praises the diversity and variety that Arabic typefaces have evolved to be, as well as indicating the constraints it presents the designer with. Sarah Alfalah's dissertation on the visual effects of Arabic type will further explore the necessity of sustaining Arabic in design through the "investigation of culture

through visual communication, specifically typography,” (Alfalah, 11). There is a burst of many new creatives who are interested in Arabic type, this will continue to propel the typographic landscape within the Middle East. Oftentimes many Arabic designed advertisements or posters will require the sacrifice of correct Arabic grammar and letter shapes to allow the aesthetics of the design to remain. At times, designers within the Middle East have compromised the technicalities of the script to universalize its communication, but one must always be aware to keep the Arabic authentically Arabic, in all its beauty and complexities as a guiding principle.

There is a lack of research within this landscape and it was prevalent that this required deeper investigation to expand the public’s knowledge on Middle Eastern type.

## **Methodology**

This research attempts to investigate the concerns of designing with Arabic typefaces. Individual interviews were conducted to obtain information from primary resources, such as those who are actively working within the design industry. Nadine Chahine, Munirah Adel and Danny Khammar were the participants who were interviewed to discover more on their perspectives of type design. The interviews provided qualitative data that was necessary to propel the research into motion. The use of primary sources was the main focus in aiding to answer the proposed question. The collected data was assembled through digital platforms such as zoom and email. Additionally, secondary research played a crucial role in the gathering of information through the dissertations of Sarah Alfalah, Frerik Kampman and Titus Nemeth as well as the use of other publications.

Following the interview process, the data was transcribed and the key responses were selected to be explored and discussed in detail. Important elements from the interviews were evident through the grouping of commonalities in themes, in accordance with the secondary research. The interviews were conducted through semi-structured forms; these forms encouraged discussion by asking open-ended

questions to the participants and studying their perspectives. The participants were asked the same questions to discover the similarities and differences that were spoken about.

This approach was best suited for qualitative research because of the human-centred approach this research strived to convey. The attention to detail and with the addition of a human voice and element made it more relatable to individuals within the landscape. The participants were able to express their experiences and thoughts in an unrestricted manner in regards to the research, thus providing more depth and dimension that is difficult to achieve from a predetermined question survey.

The selected participants were specifically chosen based on their industry experience and knowledge in designing Arabic typefaces. There were a few participants that were strategically chosen to help aid the research based on their prior experiences. The participants chosen spanned varying levels of experience which covered a wide range of diversity in the Arabic typographic field. The interviews were recorded and spanned a 30-minute time slot.

## **Background**

The three of the main Arabic scripts that will be discussed in this paper will be the Naskh (nask), Kufic (ˈkuːfɪk) and Al Ruqʿah (Ruq-a).

According to the Oxford Islamic Studies, Naskh is defined as a style of Arabic calligraphy, invented by Ibn Muqlah Shirazi. The word “Naskh” is derived from the translation of “nasakha” which means “to copy.” The written Naskh ties into the Arabic calligraphic style which is mainly based on cursive and artistic pen strokes. Mouneer El Shaarani, a Cairo based designer, revealed his thoughts on why Naskh may have affected the growth of Arabic type globally. He explains that by basing all Arabic fonts on Naskh, it was not appropriate for letterpress or computer fonts. “Naskh is a free calligraphic style that cannot be put onto one straight line without losing its original flow.



To create a balanced, harmonic Arabic font you have to think new and maybe even mix different Arabic styles, while still respecting certain visual rules. An Arab font has to be able to flow; its movement has to lead the eye, making it want to follow the direction automatically.” (El Shaarani,10) His dissection of the Naskh style has brought this discussion to the foreground of the landscape. So there is more movement, the organic shapes. If you know what to do with them, they become very powerful.



Figure 1: Naskh

The Kufic script is mainly based on the calligraphic script that has been used in the Muslim Quran. Though there are many versions of this specific script and it is easily distinguishable by its angular forms. Lastly, Al Ruq’ah script is defined to be a style of written text that is determined by the composition of shorter, straighter and more even lines, as well as its uncomplicated curves. “This style was mostly derived from the Naskh and is considered to be the easiest script for daily writing.”



Figure 2: Kufic

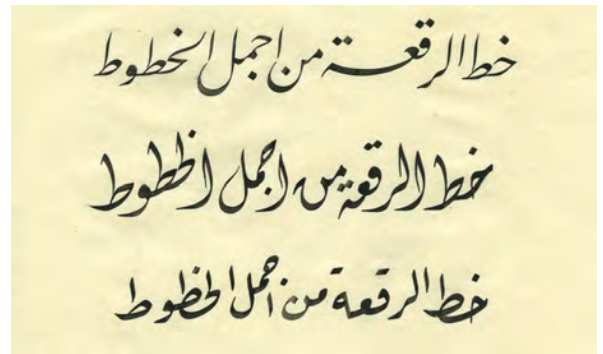


Figure 3: Al Ruq’ah

## Findings

### Experience in Typography

By interviewing experts in the field of typography and design there were many similarities among their responses. Nadine Chahine is a well known Arabic typographer and has paved the way for many designers within the Middle Eastern design landscape. She highlights the power that typography conveys in its art. It has the influence to strongly communicate emotion in various forms as well as the capacity of its versatility. Munirah Adel, a multimedia artist and designer within the Middle East had a similar outlook towards the power typography holds. She explained that typographic design is a marriage between the written and visual world. An individual has the power to manipulate how the written word is digested because of its visual representation. One can control feelings and reactions while speaking to people, both in a literal and in a metaphorical manner through type and design.

Typography has the ability to give meaning and is crucial in communications as well as in the narratives that are built. A designer is able to portray various different emotions and messages just by the outlines of letterforms. Participants expressed their passions for designing Arabic type. They explained that each Arabic letter has multiple variations, thus bringing so much to the table. Each letter has different rules; the visual diversity each letter inhibits depends on its connection to the adjacent letter or what its position is in the word. Another aspect to take into account is the element of what type of writing is being used: the Naskh, Al Ruq'ah or the Kufic scripts. There are so many layers to the process that allows for so much variety.

Participants have unanimously stated that the industry is still developing and there is so much to accomplish, therefore any knowledge given from any entity whether young or old would be an added value. Though participants were interviewed separately, they each explained that currently, the biggest challenge is the lack of education and programs offered, as well as the scarcity of books, articles and literature to expand one's knowledge.

## **Growth within the Arabic Typographic Landscape**

The Arabic typographic scene is definitely growing. The uproar of bilingual brands is challenging the industry. One of the things that may accelerate its growth further is to elevate the standards of Arabic type design and have it compete with the Latin. The audience in the Arab world, unfortunately, settle for something that speaks to the bare minimum, and one of the main reasons is because we do not live in a critique culture. Designers must elevate the standards within themselves because the industry easily presents it to them since the pool is still minute.

Previously, Arabic type was not very expressive and did not present the consumer with any emotional connection to the art. There were only a few usable typefaces available and designers were unable to use informal, modern, or professional typefaces simply because they were not available. The Middle East needed to advance as a region and designers are encouraging artistic individuals within it to not only consume but create as well. Designers are starting to find ways to bring the contemporary and the heritage to their designs and to initially bring the culture, then accurately translate it.

## **Discussion**

Typography has been an overlooked subject in several ways within the Middle East. Arabic is an extremely complex language that requires its designers to be knowledgeable about the history of its script as well as the ways in which correct typographical elements are accurately represented. The Arabization of text; which is the process of translating a message into the Arabic language, as well as the intricate design process of the translated script, requires a diverse design background and an understanding of social and cultural elements.

A major challenge that has been evident within the history of Arabic type is the difficulty of finding an appropriate typeface for a designated project. Since the observation of type has only become known in recent years, previously, designers

always had the issue of finding the proper type to design certain projects with. Thus creating a smaller pool of options which made it harder to accomplish design tasks.

In an interview conducted by Michael Dooley, he invited Maece Seirafi; a Los Angeles-based graphic designer, to explain the importance of visual design within the Middle East. Since it is a highly visual culture, one must direct their focus on the written script in order to translate it into a rich interpretation. “Middle Eastern culture is a vast melting pot of several languages and ethnic backgrounds. However, what unifies them all is the Arabic alphabet, and at times the Arabic language,” (Dooley, 2014). This quote represents the unification that typography brings within design culture.

### **Implications and Challenges in Design Practice**

In today’s landscape, designers do not come across any technical barriers anymore. Currently, there are simple softwares for designing Arabic typefaces and one of the most common software used is Glyphs. This software only works on Mac computers, which may be a challenge for those who may not have access to one. A favourable aspect of this software is the ability to encourage designers to build their typefaces through a friendly interface through simpler processes. Though there is less of a technological barrier for designers today, there still is the absence of education as well as a strong design community present within the Middle East, thus impeding the field’s growth. The Middle East does not have the access to individuals who are qualified to teach the art, and that is one of the problems that need to be addressed. Arab designers are scattered throughout geographical regions and if the knowledge of designing with Arabic type spreads, the growth of designers will allow the whole field to grow; they come hand in hand.

When comparing Latin and Arabic, there are many more typefaces in Latin with a longer and richer history than what is available in Arabic; we are catching up. Consecutively, as the ideas are sparse within Arabic type there are a plethora of opportunities that have not yet been explored, thus allowing a wider design space to be examined. The challenge that arises is the need to develop and define the creative path

which often connects to more potential but in result, presents the designer with less guidance.

Designers have taken the more functional and organic approach within their designs, mainly focusing on the function before the form. Since the function will inform the design, the output required should inspire the design and be driven by its function. Through the inspiration of the Kufic calligraphic script, the combination of two things are required for designers to utilize and build a bridge between them: firstly, the beautiful shapes that exist in Arabic calligraphy and secondly, the ideas that want to give shape to typography that do not yet exist.

A major challenge within Arabic type design is not the ideation of the design but its complexities regarding the creation and drawings. On the other hand, since there are many options within the Latin typographic landscape, it is easier to draw but is harder to ideate new and unique ideas. Nadine Chahine explains that drawing Latin sans-serifs is much easier than the process of drawing the Arabic.

Arab designers are encouraging individuals to challenge the industry and to not be afraid of change. The technological world is developing and the general public is shying away from anything that might seem unauthentic. The key is not to stay in the past. The answer lies within pushing to bridge the gap between Arabic calligraphy and type design, allowing for mistakes and experimentation to occur.

Some have stated that the main issue of Arabic typography and the reason that it was stagnant for a period of time was establishing its initial start with the Naskh script, which was harder to recreate on the letterpress or for digital fonts. Nadine disagreed with this statement since she believes that the digital space has immensely evolved since her start as a typographer, but continues to explain that the early printed Arabic was very poorly designed. “That was not the fault of Naskh, that was the fault of the people doing it. There was a lot of complexity in trying to emulate the organic shapes of Naskh, but even if it had started with the Kufic script it would have not worked as text.” It is necessary to utilize both scripts when designing since their hybrid would be more

powerful in a design sense, the landscape needs both so there is no escaping the Naskh. With the Arabic script, it is extremely difficult to create the right structures. The decisions on what structure to follow were always the most difficult aspect because a pure Kufic script and a pure Naskh script did not work. Nadine was the first typographer to have created a hybrid between both Arabic calligraphic styles and that was a quite difficult task to achieve.



Figure 6: Nadine Chahine, Zapfino

In Margret Rhodes' article, she highlighted challenges that Arabic type has faced and still continues to go through. By interviewing typographer, Peter Bil'ak, she gauges his perspective of the field's challenges; he stated, "In the last 60 years Arabic has gone through many changes, and not really positive ones, it has been subjected to Western printing techniques, which cannot accommodate the number of glyphs [in Arabic]," (Rhodes, 2015). This broke down the acceleration of its start in the landscape. As previously stated, Arabic is an extremely intricate language with a deficiency of typographers that possess a native understanding of its script. Bil'ak explains that the lack of proper typographic education within the Middle East resulted in the lack of typographers in the field; which is a prevailing reason for its stagnancy. Not enough

attention was given to the creation of Arabic fonts, as well as the slow adaptation of technological devices within the Middle East, thus permitting designers to undertake challenges introduced by the Arabic script at an even slower pace.

Visual representation has been missing within the Arab atmosphere and the quest to find the correct typographic representation is challenging. “It is like you want to speak but you do not have the words, as the words are the typefaces,” (Chahine, 2015). Middle Eastern typography is required to exhibit Arabic typefaces and its script while incorporating the modern into its design, to connect with the target audience. This is crucial to the growth of Arabic typography as to do otherwise would ensure that the language will steadily disintegrate. There is so much space for artistic expression and interpretation however, there is a lot more that needs to be discovered.

Globalization Partners International had spoken about the difficulties in finding proper Arabic typefaces that have the 4 faces available, (Regular, Italic, Bold and Bold Italic.) The 3 main uses that make it challenging for designers to translate type on screen with the continued richness and quality in design that were discussed were the level of complexity the language exhibits, the lack of education and its technical challenges when creating the typefaces.

The complexity of the language is broken down into 3 parts:

1. Arabic is a right to left language
2. It requires the joining of script: The 28 Arabic letters have different representations through the 4 glyphs within a letter corresponding to its position; initial, medial, final or isolated; in the word.
3. Required dots and diacritics: Arabic text is distinguished by its form and by the amount of dots that appear above or below it. Through the use of tashkeel or harakaat in vowels, it can completely change the way a word is pronounced and may change its meaning.

“The literal meaning of tashkeel التثكيل is “forming” or “shaping”. As the Arabic text does not provide enough information about the correct pronunciation, the main purpose of tashkeel (and Harakaat الحركات = motions) is to provide a phonetic guide or help with the correct pronunciation,” (Fisal, 2011).

## **Logo Adaptation**

The idea of logo adaptation has become prominent within the Middle East and North Africa. Since brands are trying to expand their consumer reach they are aiming to make it international. Kajag Apealian, an Arabic typographer, has spoken more in-depth on the process of the Arabization of a brand’s logo. Through this process, he discusses the first stage of analyzing the logo’s visual and cultural characteristics. He emphasizes the importance of the investigation of its culture and the lettering technique of the type. The second step to this process is the translation phase, this phase requires the ability to duplicate the visual design as well as the conceptual representation to make it a feasible depiction in Arabic. A major aspect in Arabizing a logo is the ability to maintain the authenticity of the Arabic language and its script. The visual translation of the logo needs to work well with the script and its connotation without compromising the nature of the said script.

In today's design and typographic landscape, there is a current rise in the design atmosphere, especially with creatives within the Middle East. There are many challenges within the process of Arabizing a brand’s logo and ensuring the accuracy of its guidelines are being followed through the translation. The art of typography is gradually being recognized, but some gaps are still evident and by bringing recognition to it and informing individuals globally on the challenges of designing with a different language is crucial to furthering the understanding of the depth that typography offers to its viewers and researchers. The sources presented are ones that contribute to the overall typographic landscape as well as concentrating on the lack of acknowledgement that the Arabic type deserves. The emphasis on the discrepancies and the highlighting of its successes will propel this research even further to acquire the desired result.



Sarah Achenbach speaks about the influence typography has on one's brand and its power to represent that brand in a positive or negative light. A typeface speaks about the brand's personality and if it does not present the consumer with a clear understanding of the direction the brand is leaning towards, then that in itself speaks about the brand and its inability to create a brand personality for its consumers.

Munirah Adel explained her challenges when choosing a proper font for a brand especially for one that requires both the Arabic and Latin typefaces. She stated, "since there are a limited number of well-designed Arabic typefaces, it can be difficult to choose a font and have it stand out from other brands. The challenge is to build the strong supporting elements that will play that role of differentiating your brand."

By using the principles that the Latin typefaces employ and trying to apply them into the Arabic script has created a challenging task for designers to accomplish. Munirah has designed Arabic counterparts to English logotypes, as presented in *Figure 4* she had created an Arabized logo for the Cadbury Chocolate company. This was done during a workshop and did consume a significant amount of time as well as requiring attention to detail in relation to the brand guidelines; ensuring that they are followed.



Figure 4: Munirah's Logo Adaptation



Figure 5: Maajoun's logo adaptation

To create a typeface for a brand or project in both Arabic and Latin scripts demands a high sense of responsibility since it must carry the project's aspirations. Brands have preferred their typefaces to obtain a certain gravitas and it is quite difficult from a design point of view to capture that in the typeface. A designer must learn how to keep fluidity within their designs. By working for completely different brands and projects that ask for opposite designs will help keep a designer's skillset in check and will help expand their knowledge, experience and ways to express differently within the designing landscape.

There is a significant gap in the knowledge and education of Arabic type, but with the constant practice of distributing the gained wisdom of the script, the Arabic typographic landscape will flourish. With the dedication of passionate designers who will persevere and persist in the experimental exploration as well as the history of its script, there will be growth within this landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, typography is a very crucial instrument to advance the development of the design landscape within the Middle East. Since Arabic type was not very expressive it has been an overlooked subject within the Middle East. Arabic is an extremely complex language that requires its designers to be knowledgeable about the history of its script as well as the ways in which correct typographical elements are accurately represented through its creation and the drawing process. Designers are coming together to continue encouraging the advancement and growth of this field by creating a stronger community of creative individuals who are willing to persist in its further development by using creative pedagogical methods of sharing knowledge.

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## Appendix

### *Interview Questions*

1. What made you interested in type/ design?
2. What are you influenced by when you design?
3. Would you share your experience in designing with Arabic type?
4. Are you ever influenced by english typefaces?
5. What are some challenges that you face when designing with arabic type, would you say it is harder than English? If yes, why do you think it is harder to design in arabic?
6. What can be done to make this process easier on the designer?
7. Have you ever had an issue with choosing a correct font for a brand or project design?
8. Do you believe that the visual element of type strongly influences consumer purchasing decisions or brand perception?
9. What would you change as a designer in this landscape?
10. Do you think that the Arab typographic design field is growing and if so how would you suggest to help its growth?
11. If you had one piece of advice to Arab designers who are just starting out in the field, what would you say to them?

